



### *Spiritual But Not Religious*

*Acts 17:22-31; I Peter 2:2-10; John 17:1-11*

May 21st, 2017 - 6th Sunday of Easter

First Federated Church, Peoria, Illinois

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When Sue and I were in seminary my wife took a theology class taught by Dr. Harold Niebelsick. Dr. Niebelsick had served as a chaplain in West Berlin shortly after World War II and had the enviable opportunity to meet many of the leading German theologians of the 20th century; Tillich, Barth, Bultmann and the like.

One day a new student asked Dr. Niebelsick if Islam, Jews, Buddhists and others worshiped the same God. Dr. Niebelsick slowly took off his glasses and leaned over his lectern before asking, "Please tell me, sir, just how many gods do you think there are?!"

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The Acts of the Apostles, or the Book of Acts, is part two of Luke's two part story. Part one, the gospel that bears his name, tells who Jesus is, what he taught, of his death and resurrection. Acts, part two, tells the story of the growth of the early church; a movement that began with a Jewish rabbi and a handful disciples reach into the homes of the Rich and poor, the Jew and the Gentile, the slave and free breaking down all barriers including those between male and female.

William Willimon noted that there was only one barrier left to bridge. Could it, in his own words, "hold its own in the sophisticated intellectual environment of a university town?" To find out Luke has Paul going to Athens, Greece, the city of Pericles and Plato, the Epicureans and Stoics, the cultural center of the ancient world. To be sure, Rome may have been the military and governmental center but Athens was the center of culture.

As the Apostle walked through the city streets, he was unimpressed. He referred to it as "a city full of idols". (17:16) and the Athenians were largely unimpressed with him. They called him "a babbler (v. 18) though a few were more charitable saying that he seemed to be "a preacher of foreign dieties." (ibid.)

While viewing their temples and shrines Paul saw one dedicated to "An Unseen and Unknown God." This was evidence to him that the Athenians were nothing if they were not educated AND Spiritual. Yes, they were spiritual but not necessarily religious. Where have we heard that term before; Spiritual but not religious? Ah, yes, right here. In America, the land of the separation of Church and State, the land of religious freedom.

In a recent Pew Research survey slightly more than ONE in FIVE Americans said that they are UNAFFILIATED with any religious tradition. Of that number 37-40% of Americans said that they are Spiritual but not Religious. And, according the latest census data, 47% of the people who live in the Peoria say that they are unaffiliated with a religious organization. Yet, in that same census 80% of the people in our communities say that they are spiritual.

In her book When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough<sup>1</sup> United Church of Christ minister Lillian Daniel tells of a composite conversation she had with an unnamed stranger. The conversation is familiar to every minister who has been around for a few years, believe me. “Like so many Americans” she wrote, “he had made many stops in the new American religious marketplace, where we no longer have to stay in the tradition we were born in. Today, Americans shop for churches.”

The man told her how he had been raised Roman Catholic but became disillusioned with that church; the rote ritual, the worship and the sermons all seemed irrelevant. And the scandals of the church rocked his sensibilities.

In college he was drawn to a Baptist church and accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. He was even baptized again, since his Roman baptism was not a real baptism. But the deeper he got into the group the more uncomfortable he became. They discourage his questions and told him that he just had to accept thing “on faith”. He chaffed at their strict interpretations of the bible. He drifted away and was in a kind of spiritual and religious wilderness until he met the woman who would become his wife.

They got married in her church and he eventually joined it. He liked it. He liked it a lot. They welcomed his questions. They were not so strict. He joined a small group. But when the marriage ended he no longer felt like he belonged. After all, this was his Ex-wife's church.

So now the man spends his Sundays reading the New York Times, over a cup of coffee or playing a round of golf, maybe attending a yoga class or going fishing. His church is good ol’ Mother Nature and his theology - his wrestling with God - is influenced largely by the cute things that his young son says. And his son is quite the little theologian. He says things like, “I think God is like the rainbow.”

This is not really revelatory. All of the great Christian theologians saw God’s fingerprint in nature? Yet, seeing the fingerprint of God isn’t enough, is it?

How do you answer a child’s question, like my oldest grandson did of his parents, when they ask you why a classmate has cancer? And will he die? And why would this happen to anyone, let alone a classmate. What do you say when they ask about the

pictures they see on television that show starving children with swollen bellies. Despite your best efforts to protect them, they do see them, you know. What do we say about the abuse that humans inflict upon animals like your child's pet dog? And what about the stories they see on the news or hear about in school about the atrocities in Syria or Afghanistan or even in our own homes and communities?

Children teaching their parents theology with "homespun aphorisms" serves neither the child nor parent well.

In church we wrestle with those real life situations. We practice loving each other. In today's gospel lesson, a part of what is called Jesus "Farewell Discourse," he tells his disciples that if they love him they will keep his commandments. This is a very curious because Jesus only gave one commandment, a New Commandment, namely, that they love one another as he loved them. Quite frankly, we don't do a very good job of that, by and large. Too often we do not act very Christ-like and when those outside the church see how people inside the church treat one another, they do not want any part of that!

But the church of Jesus Christ is the best hope for the world. For some reason only known God, it is only the church that is called the body of Christ. Only the church is called to be a light to the nations. Only the church is told that they will do greater things than Jesus did when they do them in Jesus' name.

In the church we learn what it means to grow in Christ. We debate and we pray and we give and we debate some more and we pray some more and we give some more. Why? Because we are Church, the Body of Christ. We are called, in the words of I Peter, to be "zealous for good", and "suffer for righteousness".

This is God's world and God created us in the divine image, called us together to be church, to be stewards, trustees of God's creation. We do it not for our glory or fame, but for the glory of God. Amen.

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1. Lillian Daniel, *When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church*, Kindle, Jericho Books, New York.